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RELIGION IN A MULTI-RELIGIOUS SOCIETY

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The teachings and messages of great religious teachers, who were founders of world religions, were primarily aimed at alleviating sufferings and bringing peace and happiness to all mankind through the application of moral and ethical conduct and righteous living. Today, however, world religions have developed into massive organised impersonal institutions with the result that the original teachings of their respective founders which expound simplicity, restraint, truthfulness and selflessness have been so eroded or neglected that hardly any influence remains over for their followers. The moral content of religion and its peace-promoting spiritual values are clouded by the more attractive materialistic values. Many of the followers of world religions have ignored or slighted the injunctions

of their religious teachers in order to seek power, fame and other material gains for their personal aggrandisement. Such abuse tends to pollute the minds of many modern religionists and causes unhealthy competition and barriers amongst different religious groups as well as within the same religious community.

Religious Intolerance

When one studies the history of the various religions of the world and the great influence religions had on people over a long period of time, one can understand what terrible mistakes have been committed through religious intolerance. Words like 'persecution', 'heretics', 'heathens', 'pagans' and many others of similar connotations, have crept into the vocabulary of religious books to describe all the brutality, cruelty, prejudice and discrimination carried in the name of religion due to religious intolerance. These unfortunate occurrences have left a stigma on religion, so much so that many thinking people tend to turn away from organised religion or from the very word 'religion' itself. Real religious values are rapidly deteriorating and disappearing from the minds of men, even from amongst those who are designated as religious people. To counter this unfortunate trend, it is necessary for a proper study and research into the practice of religious principles to be undertaken by all concerned in order to bring about better understanding and awareness of true spiritual values of religion and to avoid the unfortunate mistakes of the past.

Religious Education

To co-exist in peace and harmony in a multi-religious society, one should have a sound religious education with strong emphasis on moral and ethical values as the first positive step towards better understanding and mutual co-operation amongst all religionists. All religionists should unite and co-operate with one another to promote and institute a proper and systematic religious education, not only of a particular religion, but on the essentials of all religious teachings that would enlighten as well as give an insight into the nature of higher spiritual values of life, particularly its moral and ethical values. Such a step would be of definite assistance in reducing if not wiping off hard-core religious fanaticism and traditional prejudices, which have been the bane of inter-religious strife. Other measures to help create a better inter-religious understanding and mutual regard for one another would be the setting up of inter-religious organisations which hold regular lectures, talks, discussions, seminars and forums on religions and allied subjects. In so doing, the motivation should always be on the search for common grounds which can promote peace and harmony rather than the adoption of an attitude of supremacy or domination of one faith over another.

Welfare Activities

The holding of fellowship meetings, the institution of community service programmes and other social and welfare activities whereby all religionists, working

hand-in-hand for a common humanitarian cause, to uplift the lot of the more unfortunate ones in society, would serve as a means for a common bond of friendship transcending religious differences and creating a spirit of mutual appreciation and respect leading to inter-religious peace and harmony.

Youth Organisations

Another important area which religionists should seriously study is in the field of youth organisations and related activities. The youths of today will be the adults of tomorrow. They should not be allowed to stray into pitfalls of the present age. All the youthful energies and resources should be properly harnessed and directed towards constructive purposes. They should be made aware of all the fundamental teachings of religion in promoting a peaceful and harmonious society and not fed with venom decrying one faith against another. If properly guided through religious principles such as patience, tolerance and understanding, the youth of today would be the greatest assets in the development of greater religious harmony and mutual co-operation amongst the religionists in the days to come.

Tolerance and Respect

Tolerance and respect are two vital words that should be borne in mind in a multi-religious society. One should not only preach tolerance but try, on every possible occasion, to put into practice the benign spirit of tolerance

which would go a long way in creating a peaceful and harmonious atmosphere. We may not understand or appreciate the intrinsic values of certain religious rituals or practices carried out by certain co-religionists. Similarly, others may not be in a position to understand or appreciate our own rituals or practices. If we do not want others to ridicule our actions, we should not ridicule others. We should try to fathom or understand the practices which are foreign to us since it will help to create better understanding, thus enhancing the spirit of tolerance amongst the followers of the multi-religious denominations.

It has been said that respect begets respect. If we expect other co-religionists to give us that measure of respect in regard to our religious observances, we in turn, should not hesitate to show respect to others when they observe their own religious practices. Such an attitude will definitely contribute to a smooth and cordial relationship in a multi-religious society.

Without the practical application of the spirit of tolerance and mutual respect for one another, the ugly venom of discrimination, ridicule and hate would pour forth in jets to destroy the peace and tranquillity of our society and countries. It is a fact that in certain countries where the spirit of religious tolerance and mutual respect was non-existent, murder, arson and destruction of valuable property had taken place. Such senseless action, causing irreparable loss of valuable lives and property, should serve as an eye-opener to all those who cherish

peace and harmony. All co-religionists should join hands in friendship, amity and a spirit of goodwill towards one another to attain the cherished hope of all peace-loving people in building a harmonious and tranquil society.

Spiritual Aspects of Life

Life in this world is but a short span in the space of time. We crave for material gain but we should not neglect the spiritual aspects of life as taught to us by our age-old religious forbears. We should enrich our lives by putting into practice the pristine and noble teachings of our religious teachers to lead a respectable, decent and useful life, doing good wherever possible and shunning evil at all times. The common message propounded by religious teachers of all world religions is for all humanity to lead a humane existence and to uphold the spiritual aspects of their respective teachings, thus contributing to peace and harmony.

Propagation of Religion

In order to propagate a particular religion it is necessary that the best or the most important aspects of the religion be propounded. Such a line is to be expected since an attractive or interesting front had to be established in order to gain attention. To put the best foot forward is a fair enough proposition which all religionists, in trying to sell their religious wares, would invariably do so. However, in a multi-religious society where there is keen competition to solicit devotees and or converts, there

should be mutual understanding amongst the religious leaders to refrain from belittling, criticising or speaking ill of the beliefs and practices of another religionist. It is reasonable that all that is beautiful, attractive and beneficial in a particular religion be brought forth by its propagator, but one should refrain from stabbing another religionist in the back in order to tell the world that one's particular religion is the best and only genuine religion whereas other religious beliefs and practices are fakes. The adoption of such an attitude would tend to create ill-feelings and even animosity among co-religionists resulting in mutual retaliation and name-calling, which are definitely not the intent of any respectable religion worthy to be called a religion.

It is a fact that all religions exist for the good of mankind. All the great teachers of world religions preached peace and harmony for all humanity. The respected religious leaders in their wisdom brought forth all that is good, humane and ethical for the deliverance and emancipation of mankind. The noble religious teachers did not castigate or humiliate one another to create chaos, misunderstanding and friction amongst the masses. They had the well-being and welfare of all mankind at heart. Their sole aim was to create a better world for everyone to live in amity and harmony.

The fact that the various world religious leaders appeared in this world at different periods of time and at diverse places, tend to create the apparent diversity and multiplicity of religious beliefs and practices prevailing

in different environments and in different parts of the world. Each religious leader had his own concept, ways and means of imparting religious teachings based to a large extent on the culture of the followers. From the seeming differences arose the diversified religious beliefs and practices.

Victim of Circumstances

If a child happened to be born in a Christian family, there is no other choice except to be brought up in accordance with the religious beliefs and traditions of a Christian family. Similarly a child born in a Muslim family, would be brought up in accordance with the beliefs and practices of the Islamic faith, and that of a Buddhist family would invariably follow the Buddhist way of life. A child born in a Hindu family would be brought up as a Hindu. We are all bound by circumstances, environment, religion, race and culture, over which we had no control. As children in a particular religious family, we would be brought up in accordance with the dictates and religious background of the parents. The religious beliefs of our parents invariably became our own beliefs and a cultural background for our way of life.

Every religionist should try to understand the different environmental and cultural heritage of each of us and respect the person for what he is and what he believes in as a way of life rather than pushing one's faith down another's throat, by boasting that "my religion is the true religion – you ought to embrace my religion –

your religion is a false religion". One man's meat could be another man's poison. No compulsion, force or coercion must be exercised in a multi-religious society, if we desire to live in peace and harmony.

Itinerant Salesmen

Many a time householders complained that the peace and quiet of their homes had been violated by the unwelcome attention of itinerant salesmen hawking their unsaleable religious goods, useful or otherwise, on to the laps of unsuspecting householders. The high-powered sales-talk by the inexperienced but over-zealous itinerant salesmen, could be a real nuisance to the householders. They will not listen to a polite 'no' as an answer but would insist that the goods, usually and that by purchasing them, the householders would be stepping on the ladder leading to a heavenly paradise. They do not care to find out the particular religious denomination embraced by the householder – they are not worried as to whether their sales talk would be an insult to the intelligence or religious sensitivity of the householder. It is unfortunate that certain religious denominations choose to send out such over-zealous religious salesmen to hawk their religious wares. Such an action tends to debase rather than enhance their religion. No one likes to be told that he should embrace a particular religion by reading certain religious books failing which he would be heading for eternal damnation in hell. Everyone should

be given the respect of a mature thinking person, capable of deciding for himself the virtues of a particular religion and whether that religion is leading him to heaven or hell. It is the person's choice - a choice fully covered by our country's constitution on freedom of worship.

It is considered that in a multi-racial and multi-religious society, the co-religionists should not stoop so low as to debase themselves by condemning or speaking ill of other religionists who have embraced religions formulated by illustrious religious leaders many centuries ago. It would be well for a particular religionist to sing praises of his particular religion in his particular religious rostrum and refrain from besmirching the efforts of other religionists, whilst allowing others to decide on the nature and type of a religion they like to embrace. A person should feel free to choose what religion is good for him without the embarrassing efforts of an itinerant religious hawker trying to sell his religious 'wares' and insisting that the person should adopt a particular religion. To achieve the elusive peace and harmony in a multi-religious society, everyone should feel free to sing praises for their respective religions but should, at all costs, refrain from slinging mud at one another. The mud will spill and the effects would be disastrous.

Politics and Religion

Another aspect to be considered in the search for peace and tranquillity in a multi-religious society, is that political and racial issues should not be introduced into

a religious forum. It is appreciated that in present day politics and even those of the past in general, politicians would like to influence all institutions including religious institutions to further their political ends. All means are fair game for politicians, but religion should fight shy of politics and politicians. Spiritual platforms cater for the spiritual needs of religious-minded people, including politicians who are religious minded, but such platforms should not be opened for politicians who might wreck the religious peace and serenity of a place of worship through their political affiliations. Religion is all-embracing – hence there should be no racial barriers whatsoever.

Each and everyone of us, whilst respecting and upholding our respective religions, must not, under any circumstances, decry or look down upon the teachings of other co-religionists. We should try to study and understand the basics of all religions, picking up what is good and common in practice and discarding those controversial in character. In short, uphold your religion but respect the beliefs of others. This will definitely help in maintaining peace and harmony in a multi-religious society. ■